

## Knit, Crochet, and Stitch for Child Rights and Social Justice: Practicing Craftivism in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings

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*Utilizing a duoethnography research methodology, postsecondary students and professors discussed how preschool children's engagement in craftivism supported their understanding of homelessness. Media and picture books provoked conversations and increased the children's awareness of social issues impacting marginalized youth who are silenced and othered. Third-wave feminist ideas related to craftivism and Miranda Fricker's thinking on epistemic injustice provided a scholarly framework for the research. The study findings point to the importance of listening to children's voices and honouring their right to actively explore social issues through play, dialogue, and craftivism.*

**Key words:** *craftivism, early childhood education, activism, epistemic injustice, child rights*

The increasing interest in and resurgence of traditional crafts on social media is opening new opportunities to initiate conversations and advocate for child rights through *craftivism* (Corbett, 2017), which uses craft making to address social issues and initiate positive changes in society. This self-study research project<sup>1</sup> focused on reflexive conversations among four participants, including two undergraduate students and two faculty instructors in the bachelor of child studies degree program at Mount Royal University in Alberta, Canada. Using a duoethnography research methodology, we the participants critically reflected on and discussed our observations of preschool children's engagement in craftivism at a community childcare centre. Media, popular culture, and picture books were used to promote conversations and increase the children's awareness of social issues impacting marginalized youth who are often silenced, othered, and erased from

society. This research also sought to uphold children's rights to learn about social issues, express their perspectives, and engage as activists through meaningful, child-led participation, in alignment with Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations General Assembly, 1989; also see

Johansson et al., 2011). Together with the children, we decided what projects to create and how to use the finished crafts to address social injustices experienced by children and youth and to advocate for their rights. Critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and patience with textiles, thread, wool, and needles were important as we engaged in craft making with the children.

Through this research study we aimed to coconstruct knowledge about how children come to understand and address social issues through craftivism. We chose homelessness as our focus and main topic of discussion because of the student participants' work experiences in Calgary's homeless sector. Their personal connections with a community agency providing housing for youth experiencing homelessness gave the children informed insights into this social issue. The children's craftwork was displayed in a group home within the agency to raise awareness about equity, inclusion, and the rights of all children and youth.

Using a duoethnography research methodology, we critically discussed our observations of the children's engagement in craftivism with the intent of responding to the following research questions: How did the project support child rights and address epistemic injustice? How did children's engagement in craftivism impact their understanding of homelessness?

Through disseminating the research findings, we aim to advocate for and uphold children's right to explore social issues through craftivism. Describing young children's roles in craftivism and social change making will have future implications for educator practice, program and curriculum design, and research and scholarship in early childhood education (ECE).

### Layering stories through duoethnography

This research used a qualitative interpretive methodology in which understanding through critical dialogue is crucial in the construction and interpretation of lived experiences. Duoethnography involves layering stories of two or more individuals who experience a similar phenomenon, and data is generated through written or verbal conversations among researchers (Given, 2008). In utilizing duoethnography, we researchers investigated ourselves "instead of conducting research on others" (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 32). This form of self-study required relational ethics, listening, observing, and participating in critical dialogue about the children's craftivism and play experiences. We chose to use this self-study methodology because "duoethnographers locate the purpose of research in its responsibility to society and to the improvement of existence and of place" (Sawyer & Norris, p. 29), which closely aligns with the objective of our study—to address social issues and uphold child and youth rights. In recognizing that data is generated and analyzed simultaneously and that "duoethnographers work in multiple intersections of identity, culture, history, narrative, politics and reflexivity" (Sawyer & Norris, pp. 67–68), it was important for us to reflect on how we situated ourselves within the intersections of time and place when we engaged in conversations. Together we explored themes emerging from the lived experiences and stories in our unfolding dialogue.

As researchers, we revisited our data with renewed reflexivity, consciously distancing ourselves from stable positions of knowing. Following Lather (2009), we embraced discomfort and uncertainty, recognizing the importance of resisting overly neat interpretations that might reassert researcher authority over young participants' narratives. Similarly, Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008) concept of *fruitful immaturity* in methodology informed our approach, encouraging openness to ambiguity. However, this commitment to staying with the complexity of children's expressions—seeking out silences, contradictions, and voices that defied easy categorization (Mazzei, 2009)—posed analytical difficulties. While this approach allowed us to engage more ethically with children's contributions, it also meant that some meanings remained elusive, resisting definitive interpretation.

## The participants' positionality

As researchers, educators, and student-participants we came into this study with a deep interest in exploring topics and issues related to social justice, diversity, and identity in the context of child and youth rights.

Carolyn Bjartveit is a white, cisgender woman of northern European ancestry. She is a settler living on Treaty 7 land in Alberta, which is the ancestral land of the Blackfoot peoples and home to the Métis people. Carolyn coordinates the bachelor of child studies degree, early learning and child care program at Mount Royal University and has 13 years of preschool teaching experience and 15 years of postsecondary research and teaching experience. Her research focuses on human rights, social justice, topics of teaching and learning, and the complex intersections of the selves of students and educators with the curriculum in culturally diverse postsecondary classrooms.

Emmie Henderson-Dekort is a Dutch Canadian cisgender woman with 10 years of working in the ECE field in preschool and out-of-school care settings. She also has three years of postsecondary teaching experience. Throughout her doctoral studies and current position in postsecondary settings, Emmie's main research focus has been rights-based approaches, participatory action research with children, play-based methodologies, and trauma-informed practice.

Emma DeCecco is a cisgender woman who has lived their entire life on Treaty 7 territory in Alberta. Prior to their enrollment in their undergraduate degree, they worked for several years as an early childhood educator. After entering postsecondary studies, Emma became involved in work within the homeless sector, namely with youth experiencing homelessness, many of whom are active in addiction and criminal involvement. Emma's intersection of ECE and intensive care for at-risk youth provides them with a unique insight into the developmental necessities of the child and the often-overlooked consequences of childhood deprivation and neglect. It also provides them with a sense of altruism, in that they seek to find ways to inspire others to use their voices to uplift stigmatized and marginalized individuals.

Alisha Bagshaw Brooks is a cisgender woman with a Bangladeshi and Canadian background who currently lives on Treaty 7 territory; however, she spent many of her formative years in Australia. Alisha is a child and youth care counselling major with a background in working with young children. Since beginning postsecondary studies, she has primarily worked with women and young children fleeing domestic violence and experiencing homelessness. Additionally, she has worked with young people experiencing addiction. Her understanding of ECE and the effects of adverse childhood experiences informs her work with youth. Because of this, she is passionate about educating children and youth on social issues and the ways in which they can advocate for themselves and their peers.

## Craftivism in the early years: A scholarly review

ECE scholars (Bjartveit & Panayotidis, 2017; Osgood et al., 2017; Chang-Kredl et al., 2023) have explained that children will often attempt to make sense of social issues through "dark play" scripts and enact "situation[s] through which they can explore the world as it is or the world as they imagine it" (Gafouri, 2005, p. 17). The term *play* is difficult to define; its meaning is multilayered and complex and can be interpreted differently within cultural and historical contexts, spaces, and time. "Dark" is etymologically defined as "the absence of light" (Online Etymology Dictionary), and points to what is concealed or hidden. With the good intentions of protecting children, adults will sometimes shield children from truths about social issues and not support dark play when it unfolds. Knowledge is censored and controlled, and only what is considered "safe knowledge" (Cannella, 2002, p. 35) is permitted to be shared in some child care and early learning settings.

In supporting dark play and offering opportunities for children to exercise agency and explore their interests,

scholars and educators have come to recognize children's deep insights into social issues and their desire to become activists. Critical literacy instruction in the context of politics (Frantz Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2018), race and culture (Holmes et al., 2018), and "social action through multimodal literacies" (Kuby, 2013) in the ECE classroom is opening doors for children to have a voice and take on advocacy and activism roles (Tesar & Jukes, 2017).

In the early childhood setting and in the context of our research project, *craft* refers to creative activities or projects that engage children in hands-on exploration; it involves the "transformation of visual ideas into material forms" (Yliverronen & Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, 2016, p. 2). Craft and art making in early childhood education is traced back to Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1979), who emphasized nature as the child's "master" teacher and the importance of observing and representing nature through artistic endeavours. Rousseau wrote that children "shall color, paint, dabble. But in all dabbings ... shall not stop spying on nature" (p. 144). Rousseau's ideas inspired Heinrich Pestalozzi (1801/1894, p. 29), who vowed to connect nature to art in popular education and described "the art of teaching children to talk with the intuitive ideas given to them by nature and with those given to them by art" (p. 36). During the Romantic period, Friedrich Fröbel's early years pedagogical strategies included art and craft activities, as described by Wasmuth (2020):

The folding of shapes and clay models introduce the child to the primitive beginnings of trades and crafts and ... gain a first understanding of industrial activity. The free use of a slate, pen, clay, or building blocks offer children the opportunity to make inventions and to practice art, and through the systematic application of Fröbel's occupations, the intellectual abilities of children are promoted and nurtured, not in an abstract way, but by their own, independent doing. (Schrader-Breyman, 1890, cited in Wasmuth, 2020, pp. 146–147)

The term *craftivism* (Fitzpatrick, 2018) links activism with craft making and was coined by Betsy Greer in 2003 (Corbett, 2017). However, creating crafts as a metaphor for human rights and advocacy for social change has taken place for many centuries throughout history (Hunter, 2019). Evidence of a sharper academic focus on child activism in ECE scholarship and research over the past ten years is reflected in our review of academic journals and textbooks related to ECE (Crawford et al. 2019), art therapy (Berberian & Davis, 2020), child development (Theodotou, 2019; Paulus et al., 2020), and medical ethics (Harcourt, 2021). We did not find academic literature related specifically to craftivism in ECE settings. This self-study research fills a gap in the academic literature and, through dissemination of the findings, will advocate and uphold children's right to explore social issues through craftivism, play, and dialogue.

## **Feminism and the enactment of craftivism: The theoretical framework**

Craftivism is rooted in feminist theory and offers a lens through which to understand and engage with activism in creative ways (Chansky, 2010; Langford, 2010). Its foundation in third-wave feminism aligns with principles of inclusivity, individual expression, and intersectionality, making it a powerful tool for marginalized voices, including children, to assert their agency and challenge dominant power structures. Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice is particularly relevant here because it sheds light on the systematic disadvantage faced by certain groups in their ability to be recognized as knowers and have their perspectives taken seriously. Children, often seen as lacking credibility due to their age, are particularly vulnerable to hermeneutical injustice within societal discourses. As Cannella (2002) asserts, "within adult constructions of dominant knowledge, the lived worlds of children and the knowledge that they possess are ignored and denied" (p. 60). Craftivism offers a multifaceted approach to addressing these injustices. By centering marginalized voices and experiences, including those of children, within the framework of feminism, craftivism becomes not only a tool for social change but also a means to challenge dominant power structures and amplify the voices of children and others who have been historically marginalized.

(Langford, 2010).

Through craftivism, children can visually express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, circumventing biases and prejudices that may otherwise lead to their testimonies being dismissed. Craftivism with children serves as a creative outlet for expression of kindness and a means to address hermeneutical injustices, where children's perspectives may not be fully understood or valued within adult-centric frameworks (Fricker, 2007). "Guerrilla kindness" supports the notion of craftivism rooted in kind and positive messages (Lothian, 2018).

The notion of child rights further reinforces the importance of craftivism and emphasizes children's entitlement to express their opinions, participate in decisions that affect them, and have their voices valued and respected (Fricker, 2007; Langford, 2010). As Fricker (2007) has aptly expressed, "this is partly because children try out almost any forms of thought made available to them precisely in order to become critical beings, but also partly because their consciousness inevitably finds its first form by way of these attitudes" (p. 95). This quote underscores the significance of providing children with diverse avenues of expression and exploration, such as craftivism, to nurture their development as critical thinkers and engaged members of society. By engaging in craftivism, children not only express their creativity but also develop a deeper understanding of social issues, contributing to their growth as active participants in shaping their world.

Utilizing a duoethnography methodology, we documented the impact of craftivism on children's understanding of social issues and contributed to ongoing conversations within the fields of ECE, feminist theory, and activism. There are notable intersections of feminist theory, craftivism, and the ECE profession; the three threads weave together and have significant feminist roots that are evident within the findings of this research. By situating the exploration of children's experiences on a theoretical foundation, the research seeks to promote social change through creative expression, dialogue, and crafting.

### **The children's creative experiences**

In collaboration with preschool educators, we facilitated discussions with a group of 16 four- and five-year-old children from culturally diverse backgrounds. The discussions were related to homelessness, and we quickly came to recognize the children's deep interest in discussing social issues. The learning experiences included 90-minute craft sessions, scheduled during three consecutive weeks, that provided opportunities for the children to exercise their imaginations and creativity and ask questions about homelessness. In addition to supporting the young activists, our intention in offering the sessions was to introduce the children to craftivism, which involves craft making to address social and political issues in a gentle way. Corbett (2017) has explained that "sometimes our protests using craftivism are direct, sometimes they are more subtle, but they should always be created to engage all involved with kindness, decency and thoughtfulness" (p. 31).

Emma and Alisha informed the children about craftivism by reading a picture book about activism (Ahn, 2021) and connecting the concept of activism to craftivism through questions and dialogue. When the children were prompted with questions asking them to consider their potential roles as activists, they shared unique insights and acknowledged that activism is necessary because people are sometimes unkind to others. A child noted that "being kind to others" was a form of activism. When asked what the children might do to help someone who did not have a home, a child responded: "They can stay at my house." Other children wanted to offer their support through donations and monetary gifts. A child explained that people can be activists by "hugging them (youth experiencing homelessness)." Another child said to "start by being kind. This makes more people kind."

Examples of young children's kind and empathetic nature is reflected in documentation of preschool children's

interactions, as emphasized by early childhood educator Vivian Paley (1999), who wrote,

I've been watching young children most of my life and they are more often kind to each other than unkind. The early instinct to help someone is powerful. Think about it. How could this basic characteristic of ours disappear so quickly?" (p. 129)

Dr. Bruce Perry (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017) described how infants who were housed together in an orphanage and left for long periods with limited adult attention extended care and comfort toward each other and developed unique forms of verbal and physical communication:

With no one but each other to turn to, the children would reach their tiny hands through the bars into the next crib, holding hands, babbling and playing patty-cake. In the absence of adults, they became parents to each other.

These testimonials and living examples of children's caring nature and kindness are echoed in the words and drawings of the preschool children in our study.

After the children had shared their ideas, Emma and Alisha connected activism to craftivism by explaining to the children that their participation in discussions about homelessness and crafting a mural for youth experiencing homelessness was a form of craftivism. Using children's picture books (Gunti, 2019; Lippert, 2022) and photographs to inform the children about homeless shelters, Emma and Alisha asked the children what they might say to a homeless person. The question prompted the children to draw pictures and print messages of hope that were later included in a textile mural and gifted to a residential group home for youth experiencing homelessness in Calgary. When the children were informed that their crafts would be displayed in a home for Emma's "friends," it humanized the creative process and evoked thoughtful results.

During the first craft session, the children drew their initial ideas about homelessness using black markers and pencils on white paper. Working in black and white was intentional and encouraged the children to focus on their ideas rather than creating colourful pictures. The black and white drawings became the blueprint for what would later be colourful images included on the mural. While the children were drawing, we asked them questions and talked to them about their work. The children's drawings, stories, ideas, and messages to youth experiencing homelessness were recorded in notes and photographs.

In addition to drawing, some children built "safe" houses with wooden blocks. Taking a lock from a basket of locks and keys and placing it in front of their block house, a child explained it was "to be safe. ... I'm giving them (people living in the home) lots and lots of locks so that they know they're safe." Later the same child drew a picture of a safe place for youth to live in. Hearts, rainbows, and "safe" shelters were common themes that echoed through the drawings. A child drew a photo of themselves handing a gift to a person experiencing homelessness (Figure 1), evidence of their understanding and empathy for those less fortunate than themselves. When asked why they drew the picture, the child replied, "I want to give them presents."



Figure 1. Gift-giving as an act of kindness and love.

Prior to the second craft session, a “living wall” (Bjartveit et al., 2019) with the children’s drawings, words, and photographs of local homeless shelters and encampments was set up in the room. Davis (2014), in writing about living walls, has explained that

to keep the walls alive ... in which the not-yet-known of the children’s thoughts has space to emerge, the photos and paintings, along with quotes from what the children say, are posted on the wall in an informal way that invites the passer-by, both child and adult, to stop and contemplate what it is that is emergent there ... and to wonder how they might become involved in it, how they might respond to it. (p. 25)

The purpose of creating the living wall was to discuss and explore homeless shelters and imagine with the children what it might be like to not have a secure place to sleep at night. The documentation posted on the wall made the children’s experiences visible within the play space and sparked dialogue between the children, educators, and student participants related to the children’s unfolding project and creative experiences. The display supported the interpretation of the children’s visual works and stories by provoking dialogue and partnering with the children during each phase of the meaning-making process.

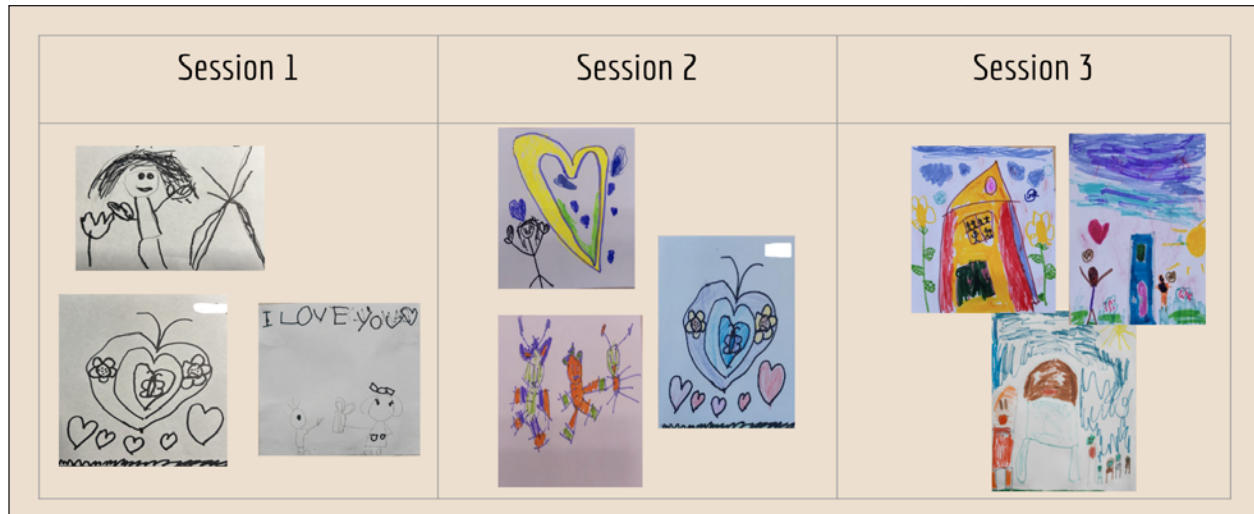


Figure 2. The children’s creative process.

Introducing colour in the drawings and paintings brought the children’s ideas to life. During the second craft session, the children’s ideas about homelessness deepened and reflected complexity and creativity. The children displayed more inherent forms of care and compassion and reflected in their drawings prior discussions and storybooks that we had read to them about homelessness and shelters. One child drew three people standing side by side (Figure 3) and told Alisha: “They are three best friends because homeless people deserve friends. Maybe they will make friends with other homeless people, so they won’t be alone.”



Figure 3. “Homeless people deserve friends.”

Another child decided to add colour to their original black and white drawing of a butterfly inside a heart and said, “whoever is sad might feel like someone loves them” when they see the picture. Hearts were frequently included in the children’s drawings and associated with messages of love and happiness, as explained by a child describing their drawing: “There are nine hearts. I want to give them (youth experiencing homelessness) love.”

We saw the evolution of the children’s understanding of homelessness reflected in their words and drawings as they transferred their messages of hope onto a textile canvas. During the first craft session, Emma mentioned that seven

youth were living in the group home where she works. Three weeks later, during the final craft session, the children remembered and drew Emma's seven friends in their pictures. One child explained: "I'm drawing all seven of your friends, so they know I care about them" (Figure 4). Many of the drawings included the home where the youth live, reflecting the children's memory of a photograph of the residence that we had shared with them in a previous week.



Figure 4. "I'm drawing all seven of your friends, so they know I care about them."

Recognizing the dynamic of a group living situation, the children displayed their understanding of comradery among people experiencing homelessness and how they, just like the children themselves, benefit from human interaction and contact. This humanization of the youth living in the group home reflected the children's responsiveness and ability to grasp that the concept of homelessness comes in many forms.

The children's discussion centered around what they would give to people less fortunate than themselves. This is evident in the drawings displayed on the mosaic mural, which include symbols of love, shelter, and friendship. The mural now hangs in the group home where the children's messages of hope, positivity, and advocacy are on display for all to see (Figure 5). The children participating in this project demonstrated that, when empowered, they can fully engage with social issues and enact their own forms of social change.

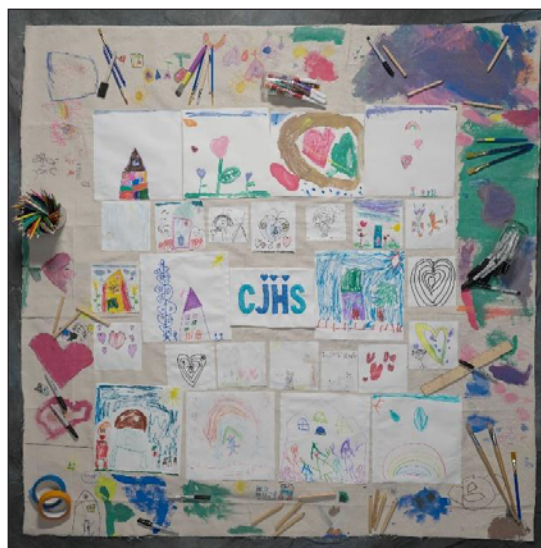


Figure 5. A mural created by the children.

## A duoethnography conversation: Child rights, homelessness and craftivism

Following the crafting sessions, we discussed the children's creative experiences and coconstructed knowledge about how the children exercised their right to address a social issue and what they came to understand about homelessness through craftivism. An excerpt from our discussion (transcription, February 28, 2024) is included in the conversation below.

### Child rights and hermeneutic injustice

**Carolyn:** How did the project support child rights and address injustice? Miranda Fricker explained that hermeneutical injustice is “when someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding” (2007, p. 7). This can happen “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone (marginalized children and youth) at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker, 2007, p.1). This sounds to me like a form of erasure and othering. But how did the children themselves participate in interrupting unfair, unethical disadvantaging of marginalized groups in society? Adults don't often think that children can be involved in interrupting injustice, but through listening to the children's conversations and recognizing their understanding of homelessness, this [interruption] was reflected in their art and conversations. I came to recognize [the] children's deep interest in talking about social issues, such as homelessness, and their desire to extend care and become actively involved in change making. Craftivism, described by Sarah Corbett (2017) as “an art of gentle protest,” opened doors for the children to learn about and address homelessness while communicating through and interpreting multimodal languages. What are your thoughts on children's roles in interrupting unfair and unethical disadvantaging of marginalized youth?

**Emmie:** I think it connects directly to children's rights in that sense. Carolyn, how you just framed it—craftivism in and of itself as a method—aligns with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It has that piece of advocacy, but also children can practice their participation. They can start to understand concepts such as: “What are the best interests of these homeless youth?” And “how can I support those [youth] through craftivism?” As you mentioned in a quote, hermeneutical injustice occurs when someone's experiences are not well understood by themselves or by others. I think children and homeless youth both have those experiences of injustice, as people don't often listen to children who are four or five years old and probably the same with homeless youth. Their voices are diminished, or their capacity is seen as less than, and so, like you said, they can challenge these things. They're almost doing it together—that's very powerful, and it's shaking the societal views of what we know and othering like you had mentioned.

**Emma:** I agree with the idea that we have two communities where their rights are quite often diminished: the rights of the child and the human rights of people who are experiencing homelessness. I was specifically thinking about their rights of provision and their right to be provided with this progressive form of knowledge in education and that includes their freedom of expression. So, we provided the children with the opportunity to ask questions and clarify their understandings while also giving them an opportunity to translate the knowledge that they gained into their own unique artistic expressions with no censorship involved. They could learn about their own knowledge and their own creativity through their artistic expression as well. We talk about what is “safe knowledge” for the child to learn. I think in this project we pushed the boundaries of what safe knowledge is, but we didn't do it in a way that was detrimental to the child. We did it in a way that was uplifting and progressive. It enabled them to engage in addressing a major social issue that they might not necessarily encounter in their everyday lives. They may not have the opportunity to develop an understanding that people who are experiencing homelessness are just like them or the fact that they have hopes, they have dreams, they imagine, and they play. Those are ideas that some children may not necessarily have been introduced

to.

**Carolyn:** What are the ethical considerations of sharing this kind of knowledge with young children? I think that you really brought that forward. Do we feel that children's rights were upheld through this project and were there moments of tension or vibrations that you felt at times when they were not honoured, or their voices were not heard?

**Emma:** My own personal vibrations that might have gotten in the way was relinquishing control and letting them (the children) take control of the artwork and have their own say in what the finished product looked like. Having to relinquish that control was very difficult because, from a pedagogical perspective, I was taught to direct children and teach them in a certain way. This child-led directive that is free flowing and innovative is a very hard concept to grasp as somebody who was taught to lead children and motivate children in a different way.

**Alisha:** Yeah, I think that we were able to see how leading children in a certain way and not allowing too much autonomy or decision making on their part is still very much the norm and practice. I think we could see that when we were deciding whether the children were going to create a mural all together or separate (craft projects) and an adult in the room decided what they thought was best and pushed the children in that direction. So, for me, that's the biggest thing that came up—not respecting their rights is not allowing them to have autonomy. I think their capacity was underestimated in those moments.

**Emma:** The first thing that comes to mind for me is that idea of child rights and that idea of participation and their right to participate in their education and use their freedom of expression to involve themselves in social and political issues such as those that arise in craftivism. I think that yields very authentic and transparent results, especially with young children because very young children, as we know, don't always have that filter that says that "I can't put this idea down on paper, it might be judged" or "I can't say this and I can't say that because it might be interpreted the wrong way." So, it yields these very transparent and authentic results of who they are as people and how they feel about certain issues.

## The children's understanding of homelessness through craftivism

**Carolyn:** How did the children's engagement in craftivism impact their understanding of homelessness?

**Alisha:** I immediately thought of the scaffolding that happened between the first session and the third session. They (the children) were able to understand the project more deeply: why we were doing it and what we were doing it for. It was very clear that their knowledge around homelessness—what it can look like and how it can be addressed—was increasing over time. I thought that was interesting, and you could see that in the art. The children's ideas got much more specific and intentional as they became more engaged with the project. Their knowledge very clearly expanded, and it was shown through the work.

**Emmie:** We often talk about play, crafts, and art as the language of children. I think these results really highlighted that they could express and try out different ideas and different ways of understanding through craftivism. There's also a social aspect that I saw unfold when they were sharing their ideas with peers or with their educators who joined them in the sessions or with us (researchers). They were seeking the opinions of others and said: "Am I on the right track here?" "What if I add this to my craft?" The children were really working through those understandings in a social way as well.

**Emma:** We were able to see them (children) situate themselves in the concept of homelessness. Through the discussion, which is a big part of what craftivism is—reflection through discussion and asking questions—but it was the introduction of the actual craft part of it that we started to see the

solidification of their ideas. Thinking across the course of the three sessions starting off with such a simple medium, they had very simple ideas. Then as the mediums got more complex, adding paints, and adding colours, the ideas started to get more complex as well, and they started to pull from the discussions as opposed to these more surface level understandings. They (children) had these more complex and nuanced understandings of what homelessness is and what a message of hope or a message of positivity would look like.

**Emmie:** It seemed as though they (children) were practicing their theory of mind in terms of empathy. They were almost putting themselves in the shoes of the people that they were designing the messages for and that might have had an impact on [the children's messages]: "I would only want kindness." "I would want gifts and food and a nice shelter." So, because the children took that point of view, I think they kind of blocked out the negative pieces, maybe unconsciously. A lot of them were saying, "if this was my friend, I'd want them to be surrounded by presents and rainbows and love," and so I think that was a piece of them shifting their view, which was a big part of the research project.

**Alisha:** The children were able to identify with what they would want if they were in that position, which I think is a big part of why they created hopeful messages. I think they all were intuitively able to recognize that they would want those hopeful, happy, and kind messages if they were in that position.

**Emma:** That's a big part of craftivism too—situating yourself within the issue and taking on the feelings and the emotions of the people in these marginalized or stigmatized groups and using your social location, whatever privileges you may have. These are young kids; they don't have many privileges but were using whatever they had to uplift others and give a voice to the voiceless. So that is a huge way that they situated themselves through craftivism.

**Carolyn:** Do you think that part of their deep interest in homelessness comes from the fact that it's sometimes a taboo topic that children don't generally have opportunities to explore? Perhaps their curiosity is piqued because there is an opening to figure things out that they are curious about and have not had the opportunity.

**Emma:** I think that that is a big part of it. We talked about children engaging in "dark play" (Bjartveit & Panayotidis, 2017) to explore different aspects of life that they (children) might not be introduced to. I think about a young child walking down the street with their parents, and if they have questions in the moment of a person who is homeless, at that moment the parent might shut them down. Or they come across—I'm just thinking about downtown in our city, there's posters for *Black Lives Matter* movements and trans rights and there's these topics that kids see but they don't necessarily have opportunities to talk about. So, I think that it opens a door when adults give them this chance to talk about topics that they might not have explored. I think they (the children) get excited because it's this thing (topic) that they don't get to talk about at home or ask questions about and now can learn about it.

## Children as interrupters and social agents of change

Through the research process and our discussion, we came to recognize that engaging young children in craftivism can highlight their capabilities as agents of social change and as injustice interrupters. Adults will sometimes shelter children out of fear of corrupting their innocence or eliciting anxiety. However, limiting children's opportunities to explore and address social and political issues is a form of erasure that limits their right to participate as activists and understand the world around them. While engaging in dialogue and craft making, the children did not experience stress when faced with the concept of homelessness. Rather, the children situated themselves within the social issue and chose to involve themselves fully in change making through a unique form of advocacy.

Instead of discrediting the children's social understanding, which aligns with Fricker's (2007) explanation of hermeneutical injustice, the children were empowered to interrupt an often-neglected social issue. The children's discussions and engagement with homelessness during the craft sessions highlighted the importance of critical literacy pedagogy (Kuby, 2013) and inquiry-based learning in ECE settings. Through asking questions and listening to ideas about homelessness, the children's comprehension of the social issue expanded, as did their critical thinking skills. The children provided fresh eyes and innovative ideas that an adult might not consider due to the preconceived assumptions and biases some adults possess. The children used the creative outlet to address homelessness, and their ideas demonstrated a deep understanding of the issue and a well-thought-out action plan to help resolve it.

Allowing the children agency over the final product and embracing their right to freedom of expression was an obstacle that we crossed while navigating our research. Pedagogical ideas and practices to motivate and guide children toward a predetermined vision are often normalized in ECE settings. Through the research results, we came to see how the children demonstrated theory of mind and used empathy to express messages of positivity, hope, and advocacy in a way that was distinctive to them. It was important and necessary for us to record dialogue while the children were making crafts to know how they were understanding the concept of homelessness. Through the child-led directive, the children were able to situate themselves within the issue and view it through their own eyes. They conceptualized what being homeless meant to them and imagined what they might want or need if they should ever experience homelessness themselves.

Pedagogically we acknowledge how craftivism can be used as a tool of engagement with young children. When combining their love of craft with social or political issues, educators can support and encourage children's participation in activism. Homelessness, which is often considered a taboo topic to discuss with children, piqued the children's interest in learning and addressing the social issue. Their vivified engagement may have stemmed from the fact that children know homelessness exists, but adults often shut down or ignore their questions and attempts to learn about the social issue. Craftivism gave the children a sense of empowerment in that they were able to engage with an issue that some might not have had opportunities to explore in the past. Engaging in craftivism empowered the children because they knew they were creating something special for someone other than themselves.

It is important to acknowledge that we felt a sense of invigoration from the children involved in this project. While the children engaged in creative activities, we ourselves participated in craftivist endeavours to thank the children and add final changes to the mural. With gift giving being recognized as a large component of the craftivist process (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 19), Alisha and Carolyn crocheted and knitted hearts to thank the children and interdisciplinary professionals who made the project possible. The logo for the group home agency in the centre of the mural was hand-stitched by Alisha and required more than twenty hours of detailed embroidery work. Members of our research team picked up needles, thread, and wool and completed projects to give to others. Through the lived experience of craftivism, we were able to better situate ourselves within the project. We noted how each stitch felt intentional and reflective, reminding us of the bigger cause and reasons for the work that we were doing.

A limitation of our research was the time constraints placed on the children due to daily programming schedules that limited their craft-making experiences. We always ended the sessions at a specific time to allow discussions, provocations, and storybook reading, and this interrupted some children's thinking and drawing activities. If the children could have revisited their work when they felt inspired or continued their crafting without interruptions, their ideas and activities might have unfolded differently.

Through our research we aimed to increase knowledge about how craftivism supports children's understanding and involvement in addressing social issues, particularly homelessness. By reflecting on the children's craft-making experiences and the research results, early childhood professionals might gain new insights and strategies to advance child rights and craftivism initiatives in early learning settings. Scholars and researchers might come to understand the impact of child-adult partnerships in craftivism as a strategy for social change making. Implications for future research stem from identifying ways in which craftivism can be integrated into pedagogy and curriculum. ECE research focused on craftivism as an art of gentle protest (Corbett, 2017) enables educators to recognize it as an innovative and accessible tool for initiating change making alongside children as it relates to social and political discourse. The findings of this study suggest a need for future research within multidisciplinary fields that focus on children's active involvement in craftivism. Through disseminating this research, we hope that future opportunities for child-led initiatives addressing social issues and the actualization of children's rights and relevant UNCRC principles will be increased in ECE and care settings.

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- 1 This research study, Self Study Reflections: Child Rights and Practicing Craftivism in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings, received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Board at Mount Royal University on February 7, 2024. File No: 103818. Testimonial model release forms were signed by parents of the children who participated in the craftivism sessions, allowing images of artwork to be included in the journal article.

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